

CORYELL COUNTY HISTORIC BRIDGE

Texas Historic Bridges Recording Project

Spanning Leon River at County Route 322

(Moved from Leon River at State Route 236,

The Grove Vicinity, Coryell County)

(Moved to lake in Battleground at Deer Park Golf Course,

Deer Park, Harris County)

Oglesby Vicinity

Coryell County

Texas

HAER No. TX-55

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WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

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HISTORIC AMERICAN ENGINEERING RECORD

CORYELL COUNTY HISTORIC BRIDGE

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Location: Spanning Leon River at County Route 322, Oglesby vicinity, Coryell County, Texas.
(Moved from Leon River at State Route 236, The Grove vicinity, Coryell County, Texas.)
(Moved to lake in Battleground at Deer Park Golf Course, Deer Park, Harris County, Texas.)
UTM: 14/636070/3472530
USGS: Oglesby, Texas, quadrangle (1994).

Date of Construction: 1891.

Designer: Clinton Bridge and Iron Company, Clinton, Iowa.

Builder: Clinton Bridge and Iron Company, Clinton, Iowa.

Present Owner: City of Deer Park.

Present Use: Golf cart and pedestrian bridge.

Significance: This twice-moved bridge is a 90'-0"-long metal pin-connected Pratt through truss that was most recently transplanted from a county road in Coryell County to a golf course in Deer Park, a Houston suburb. While this type of bridge was common for short to medium-length spans over Texas rivers and creeks by the 1890s, this particular structure is the only known bridge remaining in Texas built by the Clinton Bridge and Iron Company of Clinton, Iowa. Up until its relocation, it was the oldest documented bridge in Coryell County.

Historian: J. Philip Gruen, August 1996. Revised September 1998.

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I. Introduction

Gazing out over a vast expanse beyond Buffalo Bayou in East Texas, Simon Henry West envisioned a city. To meet this end, he bought up tracts of land, graded an avenue to the bayou, laid out a town site, and built a hotel, wharf, and a post office for a town that would become the city of Deer Park. The year was 1892.

At around the same time, a pin-connected iron truss bridge was put into service more than 150 miles away over the Leon River in Coryell County. One hundred and four years later, in 1996, these two seemingly unrelated events of the late nineteenth century were linked together when the bridge — in its new location over a golf course lake in Deer Park, approximately twenty miles away from downtown Houston — re-opened to the public. It is the only known surviving example of a bridge built in Texas by the Clinton Bridge and Iron Company of Clinton, Iowa, and up until 1995, it was the oldest span to cross the rivers of Coryell County. It is also among the fourteen earliest of the eighty-two surviving pin-connected Pratt truss bridges in Texas.¹ Slated for demolition as recently as 1995, the bridge has now been relocated, rehabilitated, and repainted, and is prepared to face the next century as a centennial monument for the city of Deer Park.

The bridge, however, is far removed in purpose, time, and space. Once a farm-to-market crossing carrying horse and buggy traffic in a rural part of Central Texas with a 5,000-pound limit, the bridge is now a structurally reinforced, 42,000-pound-limit structure serving golf carts, maintenance vehicles, and pedestrians on a public golf course amidst Greater Houston's industrial empire. Nevertheless, the preservation of this bridge keeps a part of rural Texas history alive and, of the six bridges targeted for replacement in Coryell County from 1985 to 1995, it is the only one to have survived.

II. Historic Context

The relocation to Deer Park represents the beginning of only the latest chapter in the bridge's history. The Coryell County Historic Bridge was removed from its location on County Route 322 over the Leon River in May 1995, after about thirty years of service at that site. For its first sixty or so years, the bridge spanned the Leon River approximately six miles to the southeast, in what later became part of Mother Neff Memorial State Park.

Coryell County records indicate that the bridge opened in March 1891, during a period of extensive economic growth in Coryell County.² The county was established in 1854 when the United States set up Fort Gates on the southern edge of what became the city of Gatesville, in an

¹ Texas Department of Transportation records indicate that fifty-one other pin-connected Pratt truss bridges in Texas have undetermined construction dates.

² Coryell County, Texas, *Commissioners' Court Minutes*, vol. D (Coryell County Courthouse, Gatesville, Texas), p. 418 (March 1891).

effort to protect early Anglo-American settlers from the Comanche and Kiowa tribes. The county grew slowly after the establishment of the fort, for the Civil War left the area in dire economic straits. It was only after the war that the county began to expand at all, but only at a moderate pace. Without a major county railroad terminal, goods such as cattle, cotton, corn, and oats had to be hauled out of the county first by ox-cars, then later by wagon trains, to the shipping points in Bremond, Waco, and other larger cities.

In 1882, however, the St. Louis and Southwestern Railroad (popularly known as the "Cotton Belt") extended a narrow-gauge track from Waco to Gatesville, with full stops at stations in Oglesby, Lime City, Leon Junction, and Mound, and whistle stops at Cavitt and Fort Gates. Despite the narrow-gauge track, the train's arrival marked a major turning point for the local economy. One historian described the arrival of the railroad as a "blood transfusion" for Gatesville and its surrounding region.³

A short time following construction of the Gatesville spur, the Gulf, Colorado, and Santa Fe railroad extended its line through the southwestern portion of the county, and the founding of Copperas Grove followed shortly thereafter. The coming of the railroad, the invention and widespread use of barbed wire to establish land holdings and to prevent stock from thievery, and the introduction of well drills to shorten the time necessary to retrieve water all contributed to overall county growth.⁴ With the railroads in place, the county population, approximately 11,000 in 1880, nearly doubled by 1890.⁵

Every town in Coryell County benefitted from the arrival of the railroad, but adequate roads and bridges still did not exist to facilitate the transport of goods to new stations and stops. Recognizing this need, the county commissioners spent considerable time in the 1880s and early 1890s issuing bonds to improve county infrastructure. In fact, a history of the county, published in 1894, indicated that the county's "chief work" at this time was road and bridge construction, and by providing funding to assist in this regard, the county incurred its only debt. The same source points out that the county commissioners focused upon the building of "permanent iron bridges." A number of bond issues for an average of four to six thousand dollars passed at around this time to construct "eight iron self-supporting bridges" to span the Leon, Cowhouse,

³ Mildred W. Mears, *Coryell County Scrapbook* (Waco: Texian Press, 1963), p. 7.

⁴ For a first-hand description of how these factors aided in economic growth, see B. L. Montgomery to J. P. Kendrick in Frank E. Simmons, *History of Coryell County* (Gatesville: Coryell County News, 1936; reprint, Waco: Texian Press, 1965), pp. 79-82.

⁵ The 1890 population was 21,308. Figures from Zelma May Scott, *History of Coryell County, Texas* (Austin: Texas State Historical Association, 1965), p. 146.

and Coryell Rivers in order to provide the county with "excellent and permanent communication with all its parts."⁶

On June 11, 1890, the Coryell County Court voted to erect a bridge at or near Halbert's Crossing on the Leon River. The court selected the Clinton Bridge and Iron Company of Clinton, Iowa, to manufacture and build the \$3,500.00 bridge, to be paid with bonds earning an interest rate of six percent per year.⁷ The county specified that the Clinton Bridge and Iron Company build "one wrought iron high truss bridge" 90'-0" long, 12'-0" wide, and with eastern and western approaches of 200'-0" and 90'-0".⁸ On August 18, 1891, the Coryell County commissioners ordered the company to drive pilings into a "solid foundation" and to raise cylinders 5'-0" on each side of the bridge to meet contract specifications and to allow for high water.⁹

By the 1890s, construction of wrought-iron pin-connected Pratt through trusses had become relatively commonplace both in Texas and the United States. The King Wrought Iron Bridge Manufactory and Iron Works of Iola, Kansas, built the first metal truss bridge in Texas over the Trinity River in Dallas in 1892, and Denton County was the recipient of the first pin-

⁶ *A Memorial and Biographical History of McLellan Falls, Bell, and Coryell Counties, Texas* (Chicago: The Lewis Publishing Company, 1893; reprint, St. Louis: Ingmire Publications, 1984).

⁷ *Commissioners' Court Minutes*, vol. D, p. 355 (June 1890). On May 12, 1890, the minutes show that \$4,000.00 was paid for a bridge at "Hobdy Crossing" in eight different installments of \$500.00 each. The county obligated itself to "create a sinking fund . . . and to levy all taxes necessary for the payment of said bonds." *Commissioners' Court Minutes*, vol. D, p. 418 (May 1891). Because the Clinton Bridge and Iron Company also built this bridge, it is probable that "Hobdy Crossing" is a misprint.

⁸ On September 4, 1992, an environmental assessment report regarding the bridge at its County Route 322 site noted an 11'-0" roadway, two timber span approaches, and one I-beam span approach, for a total bridge length of 135'-7". A similar report mentioned a wooden deck and a substructure of timber pilings. Because original specifications for the bridge have not been found, it is unclear whether the bridge included these features and dimensions at its original location.

⁹ *Commissioners' Court Minutes*, vol. D, August 1891. It is unclear from the minutes whether the bridge was already open for service at this time or whether it would open shortly thereafter. No additional information about bridge construction has been found in the surviving county newspapers.

connected Pratt truss.¹⁰ With the growth of mass-produced steel and the establishment of major bridge-building companies, metal truss bridges became a more economical option than the bulkier and more expensive masonry structures.

Due largely to the growth of the railroad industry, many new bridges were needed in Texas and throughout the nation. The mass-produced, pin-connected Pratt spans were particularly useful because bridge companies could fill orders quickly, ship the parts out in small pieces, and have the structure assembled on site.¹¹ Many large, out-of-state bridge companies perfected this industry by the last decades of the nineteenth century, and without any bridge fabricating companies in Texas at that time, the county commissioners had little choice but to look beyond Texas for a company to fill a steel truss bridge order.¹²

By the time the Coryell County commissioners accepted the construction bid, the Clinton Bridge and Iron Company was already a major bridge manufacturer. Only four years after its founding as the Clinton Bridge Company in 1875, the company had by 1879 erected 267 structures nationwide. It merged with the Union Iron Works around 1882, becoming the Clinton Bridge and Iron Works, and by 1891 it employed 300 to 350 people.¹³ Given the size of the company and its specialty in Pratt truss bridges, it is likely that the company was prepared to ship parts anytime, and anywhere.

III. Mother Neff State Park

The 90'-0"-long pin-connected Pratt through truss designed for Coryell County initially spanned a section of the Leon River, the largest stream of the county, on what later became State Route 236. It was situated in one of Central Texas's most picturesque locations, where "beautiful level ground" meets "magnificent old native trees."¹⁴ The crossing is about equidistant from the town of Whitson and that of The Grove, both predominantly agricultural communities.

¹⁰ Barbara Stocklin, "Statement of Historic Contexts: Historic Bridges of Texas, 1866-1945," National Register of Historic Places Multiple Property Documentation Form, 1995, pp. 3-4, U.S. Department of The Interior, National Park Service, Washington, D.C.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 14.

¹² There were no bridge companies in Texas making pre-fabricated parts at this time.

¹³ U.S. Department of the Interior, Historic American Engineering Record (HAER) No. IA-61, "Bridgeport Bridge," 1995, pp. 5-7, Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

¹⁴ Frank E. Simmons, *History of Mother Neff Memorial State Park* (Gatesville: Freeman Printing Plant, 1949), p. 17.

When the area was first settled, it served as a community gathering place — a site for picnics, camp meetings, and political rallies. Prior to that, the area contained a road created by scouts advancing ahead of United States troops sent to establish Fort Gates in 1849. In later years, that road was believed to have been traversed by Robert E. Lee and General Ben McCulloch as they led troops across the frontier to set up forts for the purposes of protecting settlers from the Comanches and other tribes. A section of the famous Chisolm Trail, by which cattle herders transported their stock to northern markets, cut a swath of land just to the east of the site.¹⁵

One of the earliest settlers in the area was Isabella Neff, who, along with her husband, operated a farm on scenic land near Eagle Springs. She stipulated in her will that six acres of the land be donated to the public after her death, and in 1921, Texas Governor Pat Morris Neff, the youngest of Isabella's eight children, turned that piece of land into Texas's first state park. In 1934, Pat Neff donated an additional 250 acres of land to increase the park's size, and obtained authorization for the use of a Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) to develop the area. During its four-year employment, the CCC landscaped the park, carved hiking trails, and built a number of structures out of local stone and heavy timbers including a clubhouse, a tabernacle, a caretaker's house, a picnic shelter, and a water tower. The CCC built the tabernacle with its back nearly abutting the bridge.

A redevelopment of the park in the early 1950s created a formal entryway with a strong visual axis. This involved the realignment of State Route 236, which meant the bridge was no longer a vital crossing in the area. Today, two rock abutments, probably those "cylinders" mentioned in the 1891 county minutes, sit just beyond the tabernacle for what would have supported the bridge's eastern approach. Once the road was realigned, the bridge was moved northwest to span the Leon River at County Route 322, just south of Pecan Grove.¹⁶

IV. County Route 322

For over thirty years the bridge remained on County Route 322, serving the vicinity's rural communities. Wear and tear and occasional flooding over the years, however, took their

¹⁵ Simmons, *History of Mother Neff*, pp. 12, 13; Simmons, *History of Coryell County*, p. 96.

¹⁶ The precise date when the bridge was moved from Mother Neff State Park remains unclear. A nomination form considering Mother Neff State Park for national register status mentions that the bridge was moved in the "early 1950s". Lisa J. Hart and Tory Laughlin-Taylor, "Mother Neff State Park and F.A.S. 21-B(1) Historic District," National Register of Historic Places Registration Form, 1992, p. 15, U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Washington, D.C. However, Charlotte Weiss, an official working with the Mother Neff State Park Association, reports that area "old-timers" recall that the bridge was moved in the 1940s. Charlotte Weiss, interview by author, 5 August 1996.

toll.¹⁷ An inspection report carried out by the Texas Department of Transportation in April of 1992 found unstable deck planks, bridge railing damage, rusted steel, and decayed timber pilings.¹⁸ Because of its 12'-0" width and five-ton weight capacity, the bridge also did not meet current county safety specifications requiring a minimum 16'-0" width and a weight capacity suitable enough to support heavy farm equipment, grain trucks, tractors, livestock trailers, and school buses. Transportation officials gave the bridge a "serious condition" rating and began inspecting it every three months. Finally, they closed it permanently in December 1993.

Noting the bridge's historic import, transportation officials attempted to find a buyer for the bridge rather than dismantling it. To meet this end, the Waco district office of the Texas Department of Transportation issued a press release announcing that a "historic" bridge was available for relocation and preservation. The release was printed in late February 1994, in the *Austin American-Statesman*, *Gatesville Messenger*, *Killeen Daily Herald*, *Temple Daily Telegram*, and the *Waco Tribune-Herald*, most of which chose to organize the information in classified advertisement format.

Around this time, transportation officials demolished other Coryell County bridges of similar vintage for safety reasons and replaced the majority of them with 24'-0" wide concrete girder bridges without weight restrictions — built under the same specifications as the Texas highway bridges.¹⁹ In a ten-year period from 1985 to 1995, eight decaying turn-of-the-century bridges were replaced in Coryell County, four of them in 1995 alone. The county did choose to allocate funds for the preservation of the West Leon Street Bridge in Gatesville, however, because its original construction included a wider roadway and the bridge no longer served as the principal thoroughfare into the city.²⁰

¹⁷ Bob Miller, "County Bridge Eligible for NRHP List," *Gatesville Messenger*, 21 May 1992, p. A-10.

¹⁸ Texas Department of Transportation, Bridge Inspection Report, 27 April 1992.

¹⁹ Susan Sanders, "Troubled Waters: Another Bridge Vanishes From Coryell County," *Gatesville Messenger*, 1 June 1995. County commissioners in 1995 stepped up the Coryell County bridge replacements to take advantage of federal funding for rural bridge replacement which, since 1985, had provided eighty percent of the funding for removal and construction of new bridges. Sanders reported that county commissioners envisioned a shutting down of those funds, and acted quickly to secure them.

²⁰ See quotes from Hy Davidson, precinct three commissioner for Coryell County, in *ibid.*

There were, however, some responses for the bridge replacement advertisement. Landowner Emily Moreland offered to buy it and move it to her ranch, and the board of directors at Mother Neff State Park requested that the bridge be returned to the park.²¹

V. Deer Park

Tom Knickerbocker of the Centurion Consulting Group, a planning, engineering, and construction management firm based in Houston, had a different idea: he suggested moving the bridge to a new golf course he was designing for the city of Deer Park. Noting that the bridge was finished around the time Deer Park was founded, Knickerbocker was able to sell the idea to Deer Park city officials.

The city of Deer Park, whose northern edge borders a section of the Houston Ship Channel along Buffalo Bayou, might have remained largely undeveloped had not oil been discovered at nearby Goose Creek in 1916. This began the establishment of the area's industries; when Shell Oil Company chose Deer Park as a site for an oil refinery in 1928, the city was set for explosive economic growth. Today, many of the nation's refining and petrochemical plants are located in Deer Park and the adjoining cities of Pasadena and LaPorte.

Deer Park's northeastern border abuts a different sort of history: the San Jacinto battlefield. It was in that area on April 21, 1836, that Sam Houston's troops launched a surprise attack on Santa Anna's relaxing Mexican cavalry, killing 630, wounding 208, and capturing 730 in only eighteen minutes of fighting, while suffering only two deaths and a small number of wounded soldiers of their own.²² This was the decisive event in Texas's quest to gain independence from Mexico, and it launched the Texas Republic.

While the 570'-0" San Jacinto Monument had stood just beyond Deer Park's municipal boundaries since 1939, the city had done little to connect itself with the historic site. In November 1993, however, the city put an \$8.25 million bond issue before its voters to authorize construction of "The Battleground at Deer Park Golf Course" on city-owned vacant land. The construction of the golf course was four-fold: to honor the Battle of San Jacinto, to celebrate the city's one-hundredth birthday, to boost its economy through tourism, and to enhance its overall quality of life. Voters approved the measure in a referendum at a nearly three-to-one ratio, with over 2,000 votes cast in favor of the course and approximately 700 opposed.

The proposed bridge relocation was not part of the legislation, however, so city officials applied for funding through the Statewide Transportation Enhancement Program created by the Intermodal Surface Transportation Efficiency Act (ISTEA) of 1991. The grant was approved in

²¹ See Emily Moreland, to Texas Department of Transportation, 16 March 1994 (Historic Bridge Inventory Files, Texas Department of Transportation, Environmental Affairs Division, Austin, Texas).

²² Figures from David G. McComb, *Texas: A Modern History* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989), p. 44.

the amount of \$108,084.58 to fund the bridge relocation. The bulk of the funding, \$80,000.00, was allocated for the extraction, relocation, rehabilitation, and reassembly of the bridge, including new approaches and landscaping. The Centurion Group collected the remaining \$20,000.00 for consulting fees.²³

There were additional costs, however: \$35,000.00 for the new concrete bridge abutments, \$26,000.00 to provide new decking and to place the bridge on the abutments, and an additional \$4,000.00 for the Service Painting Company to sandblast and repaint the bridge. Most of the money came from that which was left over from the bond fund, although the Shell Oil Company provided some funding for welding and to add a bridge handrail.²⁴ It is interesting to note that it cost just as much to paint the bridge in 1996 as it did to build it over 100 years before.

In late May of 1995, a 130-ton crane lifted the bridge from its location on County Route 322, rolled it on its side, and placed it on a flatbed truck. Supported by steel and cable bracing, the bridge movers relocated the bridge across three counties and 350 miles in a day and a half, taking detours to remain on roads that would permit its movement. Aside from structural reinforcement, a new deck, paint job, and the removal of cross bracing near the portal struts on either side, the bridge has been left largely in the condition it was found. There are still, for example, visible bends in the lower chords and in the I-beam deck supports. A \$300,000.00, 240'-0" prestressed concrete bridge with two 12'-0" travel lanes built by S. F. W. Construction Inc. of Harker Heights now spans the Leon River along County Route 322.²⁵

The bridge and the golf course opened to the public together on April 21, 1996 — exactly 160 years after the battle of San Jacinto. Because of its location near the battlefield, the course features a historic theme, with each hole named in honor of a particular individual or event involved with the struggle for Texas independence. The main clubhouse and retaining walls throughout the course resemble mission-style architecture and are constructed out of native Texan and Mexican stone. Overall, the course and some of its details are intended to provide a glimpse and an understanding of the region's past.

The bridge is plainly visible through the glass panels of the main clubhouse, the restaurant, and the pro shop. It spans a lake between the green of the ninth hole and the tee of the tenth, and is just west of the eighteenth and final hole. The lake is a repository for purified

²³ Figures from Dayton L. Spain, Jr., "Battleground at Deer Park Historic Bridge Relocation," Harris County, Texas, Statewide Transportation Enhancement Program Project Nomination Form, 1993, p. 5, Texas Department of Transportation, Environmental Affairs Division, Austin, Texas.

²⁴ Figures from *ibid.*, and Ron Crabtree, interview by author, 11 June 1996.

²⁵ Douglas Doe, "Coryell County Historic Bridge To Be Removed," *Waco Tribune-Herald*, 22 May 1995, p. C-3.

wastewater effluent to be used for course irrigation, but it also provides a water trap for the ninth and eighteenth holes.

The structural reinforcements added to the bridge have increased its weight capacity more than eight times, to 42,000 pounds. It is now a multi-purpose bridge, serving pedestrians, golf carts, and, on occasion, maintenance vehicles. Its location near the clubhouse and adjacent to the final hole makes it the course's most prominent architectural feature.²⁶ Because of its location between two holes, should course participants play a full game, they are compelled to cross the bridge at least twice.

Whether the bridge, in its new location, inspires participants and visitors alike to recall the founding of Deer Park, the battle of San Jacinto, the establishment of the Texas Republic, County Route 322, or Mother Neff State Park is perhaps questionable, but it is also probably irrelevant. More importantly, the relocation of the structure saved the last surviving Texas bridge built by the Clinton Bridge Company of Iowa, and prevented it from joining a growing list of exterminated bridges in Coryell County.

²⁶ The bridge was envisioned as the "focal point" for the course. See Spain, or Ron Crabtree, to Barbara Stocklin, 4 October 1993 (Historic Bridge Inventory Files, Texas Department of Transportation, Environmental Affairs Division, Austin, Texas), p. 2.

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APPENDIX A: Suggestions For Further Research

Some questions concerning the Coryell County Historic Bridge arose during the research and writing of this report. Some of these questions, due to limitations in the scope of the Texas Historic Bridges Recording Project, remain unanswered. It is suggested that scholars interested in this bridge consider pursuing the following:

1. Why did the price of the bridge, at one time marked for \$3,500.00, increase to \$4,000.00 a month later?
2. When was the bridge moved to its County Route 322 location?

APPENDIX B: Sketch Plan and Elevation